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McLuhan and the theory of communication

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McLuhan's *Understanding Media* dates back to the Sixties, however its insights appear to be exceptionally current. Indeed, although the prophetic nature of this work has not to be exaggerated, it is however undeniable that most of its claims appear to fit our most recent conceptions of the media. In our opinion this hinges on the fact that in McLuhan's reading of the electric media in contemporary societies we can find a more general theory of the media and communication. In this paper, we are going to show the main elements of this theory and we are going to argue to what extent these thoughts can be useful to understand today's information society and digital technologies.

First of all, we must emphasize that much of the interest in McLuhan's ideas rests on his conception of the media in general. His conception emphasizes four different aspects of the media:

- 1) Media are not neutral tools, but they have considerable psychic and social consequences, without regards to their content¹
- 2) Media are extensions of the men's and women's senses²
- 3) Each medium is in constant interplay with other media³
- 4) Media manipulate our perception of the space and time⁴

These principles together account for a sound theory of communication. Let us now explain the main implications of these principles and the reasons that lie behind their interest for contemporary theories of digital media.

In the first place, assuming that "the media is the message" implies that the media can have considerable effects upon individuals. This position was non generally accepted in the Sixties, when the effects of mass communications were said to be minimal, but fit more recent theories and, what is more important, offer a good perspective for

¹ We refer to the idea that "the media is the message" as presented in the first chapter: M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (1964, Cambridge, Mass., MIT, 1994, pp. 7-21).

² McLuhan... pp. 41-47. This idea is deeply linked to the previous one; indeed: "Any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex" (McLuhan... p. 4). Another principle very close to this is that media vary according their visual, tactile ore audile information.

³ McLuhan... pp. 48-55, 179, etc.

⁴ See later in the text for extensive discussion. In McLuhan... pp. 90, 97, 126-129 (effects of lighting), 188 (photography), 348 (objects create their space).

approaching the study of new technologies. As a consequence, we are advised to look at the intrinsic effects of new technologies. What we have seen as to Mitchell's discussion of digital imaging can be regarded as a good example. In addition however we should remark the fact that McLuhan appears to be aware of the role of social factors in determining innovations; indeed, it claims that media can "accelerate or amplify existing process"⁵.

In the second place, the claim that media are sensorial extensions of the individuals enables us to consider a vast range of phenomena, which traditionally are not addressed by scholar in media studies, as media. McLuhan is interested in phenomena such as comics, clothing, motorcar, weapons, etc. Accordingly, we can follow this principle and be concerned with many digital gadgets that have become part of everyday life. For instance, to what extent does the automation of domestic life affect our living? What is the effect of a high-speed train upon a rural community?

The third principle is very important for understanding media from two points of view. First, it suggests that media do not act alone, but are part of a large system encompassing all of the media. When a new medium is introduced, the other media can be affected and, at the same time, existing media affects the new medium. This effect is called hybridization by McLuhan and can be seen in progress in new media. For example one could easily argue that WWW formats today tend to be influenced by traditional media (magazines, books, even television, as far as animation on the web is concerned) or that the advent of new technologies is changing the way people use traditional media. Second, the claim that the content of a medium is another medium helps us explaining the nature of the computer. The computer is a sort of "meta medium", capable to simulate the interfaces of other media.

The last principle is not clearly stated by McLuhan, but can be easily deducted and, even more important, it has the most interesting theoretical consequences. According

⁵ McLuhan... p. 8.

to McLuhan, the media change our conception of space and time. Suffice it to remember his claim that “the globe is no more than a village”⁶. The implication of this position can be fully understood if we accept the idea that social space and time are defined in terms of information⁷. As a consequence, according to this principle, we can explore the implication of new technologies in shaping interpersonal relationships. Indeed, what new media do, and old media have done, is to establish new communicational contexts – virtual spaces, communities, etc. – in which individuals can interact and exchange information. We can find a couple of examples in *Understanding Media*. McLuhan mentions “the rise of the idea of transportation as communication and then the transition of the idea from transport to information by means of electricity”⁸. Yet, as a consequence, the cryptic claim that “the electric light is pure information” should become more understandable: what electric light does is to create a new social space in which people can interact and which was not previously available – for instance by lighting a square, a room or a stadium, not to mention the other uses of electricity.

What this discussion should suggest is that McLuhan ideas can still be useful for understanding developments in communication technologies because his ideas are not completely historically determined, but carry some more general principles. We think that this can be one explanation of the current interest for McLuhan and his works.

⁶ McLuhan... p.5.

⁷ This idea has been developed by Joshua Meyrowitz in *No Sense of Place : The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). The idea belongs to Meyrowitz.

⁸ McLuhan... p. 89.